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Creating Memory: J.G. Ballard and Shanghai

May 11, 2009 in [Shanghai](#), [Watching the China Watchers](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [1 comment](#)

When news of [Shanghai-born J.G. Ballard's death](#) reached China Beat, we asked friend-of-the-blog Robert Bickers, author of [Britain in China and Empire Made Me: An Englishman Adrift in Shanghai](#), to share his thoughts about the writer with us. He was kind enough to oblige, passing on these thoughts on Ballard's most famous novel, [Empire of the Sun](#) (subject, of course, of [a Spielberg film](#)), and also another work of fiction that uses Shanghai as a backdrop.

By Robert Bickers

They own him and disown him. "My brother was in his class at school," one might tell you. "Why did he tell those lies about us in that book" another will ask. The ageing Shanghai British, solipsistic to the last, and acutely sensitive still about their history, were thrilled to have spawned a novelist (as they were a ballet dancer, Margot Fonteyn), but they were mostly bewildered by his work in general, and angry in particular at his book about them, 1994's *Empire of the Sun*. But that book is not about them, of course, and it is not about Shanghai and is not about the war, although it uses all of these. In his autobiographically-derived fiction, the late J.G. Ballard pungently recreated the smell and flavour of the world they shared with him, weaving its strange way around the fixed points of their cityscape and their experiences, the Cathedral School, the Hongqiao road mansions, the internment camps at Longhua. This was a vivid recreation of their vanished lives, but as they saw their own landscape so carefully recomposed, so they saw themselves traduced by his characterizations.

They did not like what they saw in his book, but all that they saw there was themselves: British internees shown lazy and petulant in camp, expatriate householders lording it over their Chinese servants. But Ballard's tale was more concerned with the strange flavour of a city, "90% Chinese and 100% Americanised," at least as he saw it and [recalled](#) it in his 2008 memoir, *Miracles of Life: Shanghai to Shepperton*, than with the Shanghai British. It suggests many ways in which the writer's wider body of fiction had always been shaped by his childhood, as Mervyn Peake's "Notes for a projected autobiography" shows how his childhood years in the London Missionary Society compound at Tianjin lay at the heart of the Gormenghast trilogy. Perhaps the key to the failure of the Shanghai British to understand Ballard's book lies not so much in their failure to read it as fiction, and not so much in their concern with his portrayal of the British Shanghailanders society of which [Ballard's life was such a part](#), but in their failure to understand that it is a book about America. In Shanghai ten thousand British residents found themselves surrounded by American culture (Chinese culture they mostly did not see). It was both directly imported and indirectly mediated, and I think no other community of Britons had such intense exposure at a time when British feelings about the United States and US cultural influence were ambivalent, to say the least. And the key foil to the fictional Jim, of course, and to the fictional British, is the slippery and resourceful American ship's steward, Basie.

Shanghai, or "not Shanghai," is the subject, or rather setting, of one other well-known recent English fiction, Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* (2000). That tale of childhood (funny that both books are also about childhood) also prompted complaints about its use of the past, but in this case because Ishiguro did not research things quite properly enough: yes, Butterfield & Swire (whose manager in Shanghai is the protagonist's father) was a leading British firm in the city, but no, it never dealt in opium, and no, it is not extinct. The company sued (the Shanghai British could only grouse at Ballard), and as a result the firm's name was expunged from reprints of the novel. Ishiguro has a family link to the city too, his father was born there, his grandfather working there for Toyota, but the book is hardly concerned with the city in the way that Ishiguro's script for the Merchant-Ivory movie *The White Countess* tried to be. Both the Ishiguro episode, and the response to Ballard's novel remind us of the lingering continuities of the pre-1949 foreign Shanghai past, though neither book is truly about that past, and we forget that at our peril.

Robert Bickers is [Professor of History](#) at the University of Bristol, Co-Director of [the British Inter-university China Centre](#), and leads the [Historical Photographs of China project](#).

Tags: Empire of the Sun, J.G. Ballard, Robert Bickers, Shanghai